



The Devil's Advocate (Loyola Classics)

By Morris West

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“A reading experience of real emotional intensity.”—*The New York Times*

“A unique cloak-and-dagger drama of the human soul.”—*Saturday Review*

The Devil's Advocate, Morris West's best-selling novel, is a deft exploration of the meaning of faith. In an impoverished village in southern Italy, the life and death of Giacamo Nerone has inspired talk of sainthood. Father Blaise Meredith, a dying English priest, is sent from the Vatican to investigate—and to try to untangle the web of facts, rumors, and outright lies that surround Nerone's life and death. With spiritual frailty as a backdrop, *The Devil's Advocate* reminds us how the power of goodness ultimately prevails over despair.

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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover

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About the Author

Morris West (1916–1999), an Australian novelist, was one of the most popular Catholic writers of the twentieth century. Many of his twenty-nine novels were best sellers, including *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, *Lazarus*, and *The Clowns of God*.

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Introduction

Kenneth Woodward

I met Morris West only once. It was in 1981, and on the occasion of his latest novel West's American

publisher invited a small group of us to dinner at the Century Club in New York City. The entire evening West held forth with wonderful stories about the Vatican and the foibles of its ecclesiastical bureaucrats. If he remembered me at all, it would have been as the poor fellow three seats down whose nose began to bleed uncontrollably just as dessert was being served. The two of us never did get a chance to compare notes. Among the journalists who had covered Vatican Council II, the conventional wisdom was that until the council opened in October of 1962—until, that is, we journalists descended on Rome to tell our tales—the Vatican had been a secret place known only to those who worked and lived inside its walls. All the rest was educated gossip. But before the pack of us (about 3,000 reporters at the start) arrived on the scene, West had lived in Italy and had been for a time the Vatican correspondent for the (London) Daily Mail. West made good imaginative

use of what he learned. In all, West wrote five “Vatican” novels: *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (1963), *The Clowns of God* (1981), *Lazarus* (1990), and *Eminence* (1998). But the best of this series, to my mind, is his first, *The Devil’s Advocate*, published in 1959—six years before Vatican II and just a year into the pontificate of John XXIII.

The ecclesiastical context of *The Devil’s Advocate* is, therefore, the church of Pius XII—the end of an era, not the start of a new one. The investigation of candidates for sainthood is still a function of the Congregation of Rites, and the office of the promoter of the faith—popularly known as the devil’s advocate—is still in existence. (It would be abolished in 1983, as part of the revision of canon law inspired by Vatican II.) West’s central character is an English monsignor, Blaise Meredith, trained as a canon lawyer and in the service of the promoter of the faith. As we find him, Meredith has just learned that he has cancer of the stomach and not much time to live. Nor much to live for either, as it turns out. While his desk-bound body wastes away, his soul has already turned to sand. He fears death. “There is no passion in your life, my son,” his superior, Cardinal Marotta, tells him candidly. “You have never loved a woman, nor hated a man, nor pitied a child. You have withdrawn yourself too long and you are a stranger in the human family.” As much for his own good as for the sake of church business, Marotta sends Meredith on a journey to investigate

claims of sainthood on behalf of Giacomo Nerone, a young man who was killed and buried in a rural area far south of Rome. This novel, then, is not about the Vatican at all, or really about the canonization process, though it is about ways of redemption and the forms that holiness can take.

The immediate biographical background to the novel is this: earlier in the 1950s, West had gone to Italy where he worked with an Italian priest whose mission was to help the street urchins of Sicily. Based on what he learned there, West produced a nonfiction book, *Children of the Sun* (1957), and it is his deep immersion in the culture of poverty, Italian-style, that conditions and informs *The Devil’s Advocate*. Meredith’s destination is a pair of hilltop villages in Calabria, where the burial place of the reputed saint has made one village prosperous as a mecca for pilgrims while the twin village, where Giacomo Nerone had actually lived, has sunk into poverty. Like Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, Nerone has already gained unofficial sainthood by popular acclamation of the locals: they regard him as a martyr. Meredith’s job is to train his legalistic and disciplined mind on the stories of ignorant and superstitious peasants and report back to Rome whether Nerone’s reputation for exceptional holiness is justified.

What he finds—or so it first appears—is a nest of vipers. There is the local parish priest, Father Anselmo, dirt poor, uncouth, ill-educated, and living openly with a woman. There is Nina, the reputed saint’s lover and fiercely proud mother of his bastard child, now dismissed by locals as “the whore” who “slept with a saint.” There is the saint’s confused child, Paolo, now a languid but ambitious adolescent whose body is prized by Nicholas Black, a gay British painter who hopes to take the boy to Rome as his own. Black in turn is dependent on the local contessa; love-starved, cunning, and narcissistic, she covets Paolo as the son she never had. And finally, there is Aldo Meyer, the makeshift village doctor—a boozier, a Jew, and an atheist. Meredith must come to understand all of these people, so unlike his ecclesiastical colleagues at the Vatican, if he is ever to get at the truth of the putative local saint, and the truth about himself as well. As for Nerone, he comes alive through a series of flashbacks that return Meredith and the reader to the early 1940s. Rome is

in the hands of Germans but the Allied invasion of southern Italy has begun and the troops are pushing north out of Sicily. Retreating German soldiers are encroaching on the village and behind them bands of predatory Italian partisans—armed communist thugs, really—are lurking in the hills. But to say more would spoil the plot.

Rereading *The Devil's Advocate*, I noticed how cinematic the novel is. The reader can readily identify scenes that would easily translate into dramatic and character-revealing set pieces, as well as the panoramic camera sweeps that would allow the landscape itself to become an active and evocative element in the story—as West intended. In fact, *The Devil's Advocate* was one of two novels West wrote that were turned into films (*The Shoes of the Fisherman*, starring Anthony Quinn, was the other). I wish I knew how West felt about these Hollywood translations of his work. In any case, revenue from the films was one reason why West was able to do what few novelists today can: support a family as a full-time writer.

Inevitably, *The Devil's Advocate* invites comparison with *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene's own novel about a priest who finds redemption among the down-and-out in the hinterlands of revolutionary Mexico. One interesting difference is this: Where Greene sees his whiskey priest as ontologically different from other men because of his ordination and the powers that go with it, West's dying Meredith comes to feel that "I must understand that a priest is just a man with sacramental faculties." Greene, to be sure, was by far the more polished and more subtle writer. But the two books share a similar fascination with the power of love and the mystery of divine grace—not to mention the many sides of sin. Of the books in this series, the spiritual atmosphere of *The Devil's Advocate* is kin to what we find in François Mauriac's *Vipers' Tangle*. Each has a specific gravity that is possible only in a world where sin and salvation are considered real and where the line between them is recognized as wafer thin. That's what makes them Catholic—not the presence of priests as characters, or of the church institutional as setting. Contemporary Catholic novelists can no longer presume their readers understand the spiritual struggles that give these novels life, and so must proceed by irony or indirection into those realms of the soul that their predecessors could assume their readers recognized and understood. Are those realms still intelligible to the reader of today? Read on and decide for yourself.

Kenneth Woodward is the author of three books, including *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why*, and was for thirty-eight years religion editor of *Newsweek*.

The Devil's Advocate

"I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held."

Apocalypse 6:9

1

It was his profession to prepare other men for death; it shocked him to be so unready for his own. He was a reasonable man and reason told him that a man's death sentence is written on his palm the day he is born; he was a cold man, little troubled by passion, irked not at all by discipline, yet his first impulse had been a wild clinging to the illusion of immortality.

It was part of the decency of Death that he should come unheralded with face covered and hands concealed, at the hour when he was least expected. He should come slowly, softly, like his brother Sleep—or swiftly and violently like the consummation of the act of love, so that the moment of surrender would be a stillness and a satiety instead of a wrenching separation of spirit and flesh.

The decency of Death. It was the thing men hoped for vaguely, prayed for if they were disposed to pray, regretted bitterly when they knew it would be denied to them. Blaise Meredith was regretting it now, as he sat in the thin spring

sunshine, watching the slow, processional swans on the Serpentine, the courting couples on the grass, the leashed poodles trotting fastidiously along the paths at the flirting skirts of their owners.

In the midst of all this life—the thrusting grass, the trees bursting with new sap, the nodding of crocus and daffodil, the languid love play of youth, the vigor of the elderly strollers—he alone, it seemed, had been marked to die. There was no mistaking the urgency or the finality of the mandate. It was written, for all to read, not in the lines of his palm, but in the square sheet of photographic negative where a small gra...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kenneth Hill:

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Vikki Maynard:

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Selma Lang:

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